

SILVER HARMONY AWARDS 2007

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For Making Science Fun for the Children of India

By Meeta Bhatti



(All Photographs by Kaushal Parikh)

Arvind Gupta is a ‘backyardigan’. Like the children’s animation series by the same name, he makes real the fantasy play that happens in every child’s mind. Surrounded by junk, the 54 year-old, in his corduroys and *khadi kurta*, walks around barefoot at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) at Pune University, creating teaching aids that he loves to call “toys”. Gupta’s office is littered with finds from the local bazaar, garbage

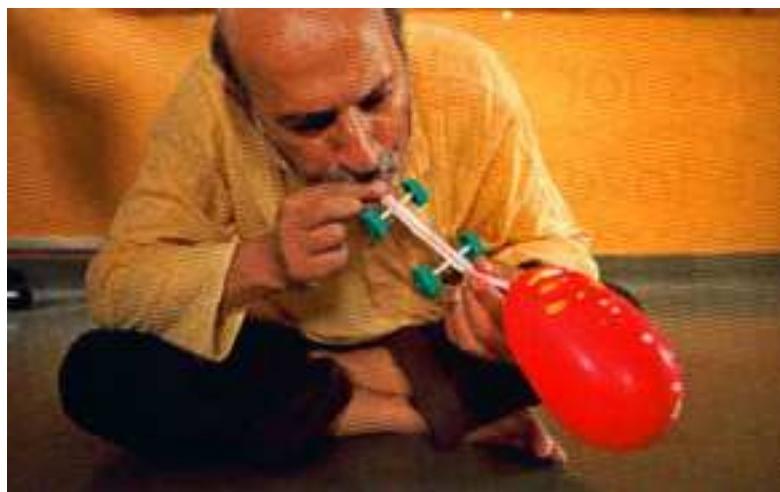
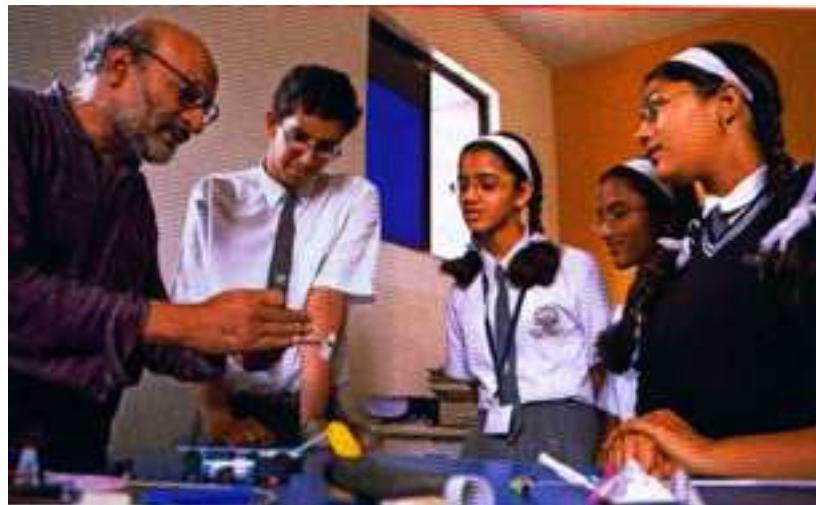
cans or his own house. There are broken CDs, used Tetrapaks, bicycle valves and tubes, film rolls, magnets, plastic straws, used refills of ballpoint pens, all types of paper, worn-out bathroom slippers, matchsticks and matchboxes, mirrors, bangles and combs. And hanging from soft-boards, wall nails, doorknobs and handles are Tetrapak butterflies, needle and thread acrobats, paper birds, spiders and skeletons.

These form the bedrock of fundamentals in science for young students who visit the Centre thrice a week in batches of 50. Astrophysicist Dr Jayant Narlikar assigned the space at IUCAA to Gupta in 2004 (until then Gupta was a teacher on the move). This year, in celebration of completing three years here, Gupta has finished uploading over 700 books for children, parents and teachers on www.arvindguptatoys.com. Inaugurated by former president A P J Abdul Kalam in June 2007, the website is a treasure-trove of rare books, also translated into Hindi and Marathi. Soon the visually impaired will also be able to read books online using screen-reading software.

“Only those teachers who punish kids by making them stand outside the class go to heaven,” quips Gupta. “After all, if s outside that children learn the most.” His role model is Gandhi’s contemporary Gijubhai Badheka,

“Our focus will be on valuable literature that is out of print,” says Gupta, who quit his job as an engineer at TELCO in the early 1970s to train rural teachers.

“How you tread the thin line between science and fun puts the joy into learning” a renowned teacher. Badheka’s *Divasvapna* (Day Dreams), an account of his experiment in Montessori education, is one of the books on Gupta’s website. Some rare books on the site include the *Totto-Chan* stories and Isaac Asimov’s series of science facts.



“It was a time when a lot of social energy was released and a bunch of us decided to contribute to change,” recalls Gupta. “We believed that you couldn’t sit in an office and write curriculum for rural teachers. Our syllabus for children was 10 little fingers.”

Gupta handed over the responsibility of earning to his teacher-wife Sunita so he could pursue his passion for making teaching aids.

In fact, the site features over 250 aids. There’s a pump to blow balloons, coke can airplane, portable generator, windmill and floating forks, to name a few. In a few easy steps, these explain the science behind centrifugal force, fiber optics and magnetic levitation. “The line between science and fun is very thin,” says Gupta. “It’s how you tread it [or not] that puts the joy back into learning.”